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**Truth, History and Representation in Margaret Atwood's
Alias Grace**

by

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the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English Literary
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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Date: 3 September 2002

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Abstract

In the Introduction of this minor dissertation, Margaret Atwood as a post-modern writer and her interest in fictional autobiographies are considered, particularly with regard to memory, the formation of self-identity and amnesia. Parallels are drawn between Surfacing and Cat's Eye as fictional works, and Alias Grace, which is based on the life of a historical person. The novel Alias Grace alternates between first- and third-person accounts, and reflects Atwood's preoccupation with narrative techniques. The definition of post-modernism is regarded, as well as Atwood's own acknowledgements in her "Author's Afterword" on how she proceeds to write this fictional autobiography. Her focus on mental illnesses is given perspective in a brief discussion on different sorts of memory loss. These manifestations affect the concept of truth, which is explored in the first section of the dissertation. This section draws on the unreliability of Grace's first-person accounts and the question of whether she is fabricating the truth or has simply forgotten crucial moments of her past. The reader is also constantly made aware that Grace attempts to ensure better conditions for herself in the penitentiary, and she will therefore not disclose any information that might be damaging to her character. That which she discloses partly depends on her relationship in terms of trust with Doctor Jordan. A few episodes where Grace loses consciousness are reviewed, as well as instances where she exposes her literary background and her ability to change words or ideas in texts that she has read. It is concluded at the end of the first section that the truth eludes the reader. With this in mind, it is examined in the second section that the issue of truth is complicated, and even undermined, by the gender and class inequity of the patriarchal society in which Grace, Mary and Nancy are instrumentalised and exploited. The relationship between Grace and Mary is explored in order to demonstrate the happy memories that are relevant in Grace's present, where her past remains illusive. The reader is also drawn into these cheerful experiences, and takes Mary's presence for granted until the neuro-hypnotic séance, during which Grace's double consciousness is revealed. Her 'friend' Mary is exposed as a facet of Grace's own personality. Class oppression is explored further through the characters of Nancy and Mrs Humphrey, who are trapped in a vicious circle that Grace escapes by engaging in the creative activity of quilt-making. In this way she is able to express her solidarity with Mary and Nancy as victims of

patriarchal injustice. In the Conclusion an overview of the question of truth is given and it is demonstrated how truth is inseparable from the issues of class and gender relations. The lack of traditional closure in Alias Grace is explored briefly. Grace's camaraderie and solidarity with her two friends, as well as her retelling of the Biblical account of the Garden of Eden through her tapestry work, is shown to be a transgressive agency that marks the greater significance of the novel.

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Opsomming

In die inleiding van hierdie kort verhandeling word gefokus op Margaret Atwood as 'n post-modernistiese skrywer, en aan haar belangstelling in verbeeldingsoutobiografieë. Daar word gefokus op geheue, die vorming van self-identiteit en amnesie. Vergelykings word getref tussen Surfacing en Cat's Eye as fiksie, en Alias Grace, wat gebaseer is op die lewe van 'n historiese persoon. In die roman Alias Grace word afwisselend gebruik gemaak van 'n eerste- en derde-persoonverteller – wat Atwood se besondere belangstelling in vertellingstegnieke demonstreer. Post-modernisme, asook die “Skrywersnawoord” in Alias Grace, waarin die skrywer rekenskap gee van haar werkwyse met betrekking tot hierdie verbeeldingsoutobiografie, word geanaliseer. Haar toespitsing op geestesiektes word in perspektief geplaas in 'n kort bespreking van verskillende tipes geheueverlies. Die manifestasies van amnesie het 'n uitwerking op die konsep van waarheid, wat in die eerste deel van die verhandeling ondersoek word. Die ongeloofwaardigheid van Grace se eerste persoonvertellings en die vraag of sy die waarheid fabriseer of gewoon belangrike momente uit haar verlede vergeet het, hou hiermee verband. Die leser word ook aanhoudend bewus gemaak van Grace se pogings om haar omstandighede in die strafgevangenis te verbeter en sodoende enige inligting wat haar beeld sou skaad, te verswyg. Dit wat sy wel openbaar, word ook bepaal deur die mate van vertroue in haar verhouding met Dokter Jordan. Enkele episodes waar Grace haar bewussyn verloor, word ondersoek, asook gevalle wat getuig van haar letterkundige agtergrond en haar vermoë om woorde of idees uit die tekste wat sy gelees het, te verander. Die bevinding dat die waarheid die leser ontglip, vorm die sluitstuk van deel een. Met dié bevinding in gedagte, word in die tweede deel aandag gegee aan die feit dat die konsep van waarheid kompleks is, en selfs ondermyn word deur die ongeloofwaardigheid van klas en gender in die patriargale samelewing waar Grace, Mary en Nancy uitgebuit word. Die verhouding tussen Grace en Mary word ondersoek teneinde die gelukkige herinneringe wat Grace se hede kleur, te verklaar, terwyl die verlede bedrieglik en ontglippend bly. Ook die leser word betrek by hierdie gelukkige ervarings en aanvaar Mary se teenwoordigheid as vanselfsprekend tot by die neuro-hipnotiese séance waartydens Grace se dubbele bewussyn aan die lug kom. Haar “vriendin” Mary

word onthul as 'n faset van Grace se eie persoonlikheid. Onderdrukking op grond van klas word verder ondersoek met verwysing na die karakters van Nancy en Mevrouw Humphrey, vasgevang in 'n bese kringloop waaruit Grace ontsnap deur haar te wy aan die skeppende aktiwiteit van 'n lappiesdeken. Op hierdie wyse is Grace in staat om uitdrukking te gee aan haar solidariteit met Mary en Nancy as slagoffers van patriargale ongeregtigheid. Die slotsom omvat 'n oorsig van waarheidsvraagstuk en sy onlosmaaklike verbintenis met kwessies aangaande klas en gender. Oor die afwesigheid van 'n tradisionele 'closure' in Alias Grace word kortliks besin. Grace se kameraadskaplikheid en solidariteit met haar twee vriendinne, asook haar hervertelling van die Bybelverhaal oor die Tuin van Eden deur middel van haar tapisserie, demonstreer haar agentskap.

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Introduction

Canadian poet, critic and novelist Margaret Atwood is one of the most studied contemporary writers since the 1970's. Her focus ranges from social criticism to complex political, nationalist and psychological themes that have evolved in interesting ways since the publication of her first volume of poetry, The Circle Game, in 1966. It is her interest in the thematic concerns of post-modern narrative that will be the focus of this dissertation.

As a predominantly feminist writer,¹ Margaret Atwood has published a number of novels in which she focuses on the lives and personal growth of women. As many of the fictional characters reflect the author's personal experience, her novels contain autobiographical components. In the following pages I will briefly sketch the theme of amnesia in Surfacing and Cat's Eye, which are fictional autobiographies. I will then go on to discuss the significance of amnesia in Alias Grace, a first-person narrative based on the life of a historical person.

Surfacing, first published in 1972, established Margaret Atwood as an eminent North American novelist at a time when issues of feminism, counter-culturalism and general Canadian concerns – topics referred to throughout the novel – became prominent. The protagonist, who remains nameless for the duration of the story, goes in search of her missing father who is presumed dead. By focusing on his disappearance, this first-person narrator confronts her past, which consists of a series of fictitious memories concerning, among other things, marriage and the birth of a child. These reminiscences are created and reconfigured in order to protect her from a disruptive past.

The reader, who is exposed to fragments of memories in this work of fiction, comes to understand why the protagonist is compelled to alter them. An overwhelming

¹ In his *Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, Jeremy Hawthorn quotes Toril Moi, who draws a distinction between three cognate terms of "feminism": "*feminism* is a political position, *femaleness* a matter of biology, and *femininity* a set of culturally defined characteristics" (Hawthorne 1994:67-8). He then cites Elaine Showalter on the feminine stage which implicates, "a prolonged phase of imitating the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition and internalising its standards of art; the feminist stage involves the advocacy of minority rights and values; and the female stage is the phase of self-discovery and search for identity" (68). Many will argue that Atwood is not a feminist writer as the concerns of her female characters are often subtle and concealed. Yet her interest in the situation of women pervades all her novels. She persistently integrates issues of class, sexuality and gender.

sense of the seclusion of the protagonist as a child is brought across by the first-person speaker, who not only presently regards her parents as “living in some other time” (3), but also distances her own family by referring to them in the third person plural as she and her three friends drive to her childhood home. She hereby distances herself from particular memories, such as driving fast over the road in the family car, and demonstrates the estrangement that she experiences at present from her parents and her distant past. She is, however, conscious of this familial renunciation: “That won’t work,” she says, “I can’t call them ‘they’ as if they were somebody else’s family: I have to keep myself from telling that story” (8). Her friends are denied access to her story, and the reader, in a similar way, often feels that certain details are omitted, which, if revealed, could contribute to the Surfacers’ healing process.

The protagonist’s father, who had been passive during the war, never had a close relationship with her as he preferred isolation to company in general: “He didn’t dislike people, he merely found them irrational; animals, he said, were more consistent, their behaviour at least was more predictable”. As a result of his need for seclusion, he withdrew from society and “split between two anonymities: the city and the bush” (53). His wife and his children lived with him, but remained estranged from his reality throughout his life. The protagonist’s mother suffered from various illnesses, possibly as a result of this isolation, and would stay in bed day after day, even when the children ceased to take her maladies seriously by regarding them as passing phases. In one vivid scene that the protagonist relates, she asks her mother where her brother would have gone had he drowned – as he almost had². Her mother, while cooking, tries to distract her with a piece of dough, and answers, “Nobody knows” (68). The protagonist was clearly denied an adequate measure of affection as a child, both parents being absorbed in their own private worlds and unable to communicate their own spiritual beliefs to their children. The Surfacers’ craving for attention becomes clear when she runs away from David, Anna and Joe near the end of the novel, and expects them to come in search of her.

² This experience, which occurred before her birth, seems to have traumatised her more than any of the other family members, and captivates her imagination throughout the novel. She refers to the event as if she has witnessed it herself, and expresses this certainty on page 26: “I believe that an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look through the walls of the mother’s stomach, like a frog in a jar.”

Several times she shouts, "I'm here!" as if to confirm and then reconfirm her presence to somebody other than herself (166).

As a result of having lived in an isolated area as a child, the protagonist also suffers from cultural estrangement at school. Not being acquainted with the local customs, she becomes the victim of merciless childhood games, causing her to become "socially retarded" (66). She recounts a few memories that relate directly to her search for acceptance, for example her desire to go to Sunday school in order to facilitate integration with the other children. With this lonely childhood, both in familial and societal terms, the protagonist does not surprise the reader by revealing that she has eloped with a married man. Her intention might have been to attract attention, but her affair leads only to a further traumatic encounter, and what is more, to a series of fabricated memories that conceal the truth about her baby. The reader is drawn into her truth when she speaks of her child and husband on page 28: "But I couldn't have brought the child here.... It was my husband's, he imposed it on me...after it was born I was of no more use." We only realize much later in the novel that the idea of marriage and giving birth to a child are mere figments of her imagination. The Surfacer does not come to this realisation until the moment she dives into the lake at a spot indicated by her father on a map. Symbolically, she liberates herself from her long denial of past reality by delving deep into her subconscious and recovering the painful truth about her baby that was aborted. As she envisages the images of the foetus curled up in a bottle, she becomes aware that it died before having a chance of life. In the same way she remembers that the man she considered to be her husband was in reality a married schoolteacher, and one with whom she had merely had an affair:

Ring on my finger. It was all real enough, it was enough reality forever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, and I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over wrong parts. A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports: but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd lived in it until now (138).

The reader is aware of the individual need to repress painful memories; these repressions render day-to-day living bearable. Yet it is the process of gaining consciousness of this

repression that is most significant, and that gives us certainty at the end of the novel that a positive form of personal growth has occurred. The protagonist acknowledges as she revisits her past:

I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of the other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong, the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I'll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it, the ones who could help are gone (67).

The Surfacers' awareness of the danger involved in inventing a past from information made accessible through the spoken and written accounts of others, compels her to destroy any symbols of her past. "Everything from history must be eliminated," she says, as she burns photo albums, scrapbooks, pictures, and later on books, crockery and bedding (170). The ring from the man she now knows is her "non-husband", is also dropped into the fire.

Yet while the protagonist becomes aware of the false memories that she has required to create, we realise that she has a further need to escape from her current state of affairs. This is reflected in sudden feelings of animosity towards her friends, exacerbated by the pressure exerted by her partner to respond to a marriage proposal. She avoids the weight of these demands by capitalizing on her vivid imagination. Having run away to be on her own, the protagonist starts to live like an animal, and conceives of herself becoming one so as to justify her social seclusion. She also hallucinates, seeing her mother feeding the jays, as well as spotting her father and his footsteps, which turn out to be her own. She has needed to imagine the presence of her parents and her own metamorphosis in order to survive not only the return of her disruptive memories, but also her present tribulations. Yet she achieves an impressive level of insight in the final chapter of the novel, when she says,

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth (184).

She recognises what she has forgotten about her past, and that which she has invented is irrelevant when compared to the importance of self-empowerment as a woman and an individual in society. The protagonist can also forgive her parents as she comes to appreciate that they were only human, “something I never gave them credit for, but their totalitarian innocence was my own” (184). Coming to terms with the fact that her parents were allowed to make mistakes, the Surfacer comes to understand that her father was only trying to protect his family from the war, while her mother, much like herself, had been fighting not only against pain and isolation, but also against “something in a vanished history” (184). The reader is aware that the protagonist’s fabricated memories were essential in protecting her from a childhood lacking in affection.

We observe a behavioural pattern in the female protagonists of Atwood’s novels. In order for her characters to deal with their harsh reality, their memories are adjusted, either intentionally or unconsciously, through amnesia. Calculated alteration versus involuntary loss of memory: does the protagonist have control over her memory, or does she lose control through the effects of trauma? In Cat’s Eye (1988), the first-person speaker also looks back to her past and questions that which she can remember, and how this comes about. Elaine Risley, the protagonist, is an artist returning to the city of her youth where disturbing childhood memories resurface. Through confronting her past in the form of her artworks (which serve as titles for each of the fifteen chapters of the novel), she learns to grapple with her traumatic experiences and thereby to heal herself emotionally as she allows her identity to develop through her paintings.

Both of these novels reveal Margaret Atwood’s fascination with memories, an essential psychological ingredient in the formation of the protagonists’ identities. This foregrounding of the processes of memory and forgetting constitute a theme that runs through her novels and never ceases to capture the imagination and curiosity of the reader.

In Cat’s Eye, arguably the novel’s most disturbing scene unfolds when a trio of Elaine’s so-called friends, Cordelia, Grace and Carol, dress her in black, lower her into a hole in Cordelia’s backyard and throw shovelfuls of dirt on planks placed overhead. Elaine relives this distressing experience years later and says,

When I remember back to this time in the hole, I can't really remember what happened, maybe these emotions I remember are not the right emotions. I know the others came and got me out after a while, and the game or some other game continued. I have no image of myself in the hole; only a black square filled with nothing, a square like a door. Perhaps the square is empty; perhaps it is only a marker, a marker that separates the time before it from the time after. The point at which I lost the power. Was I crying when they took me out of the hole? It seems likely. On the other hand, I doubt it. But I can't remember (112-3).

Elaine explores the possibilities of what she might have felt at the time, and concurrently admits that she is not certain of her facts because she can't recall them. A similar phenomenon occurs in another disturbing experience one late afternoon when Elaine walks home with Grace, Cordelia and Carol. Cordelia falls by accident, and punishes Elaine for laughing by throwing her hat over the bridge into the ravine and demanding that she fetch it. Elaine does so, and, while reliving this incident, she is able to recall exactly how she waded through water and climbed out of the ravine, as well as seeing a lady offering her sympathy, whom she decides must be the Virgin Mary. Despite the vividness with which the first-person speaker relates her shocking experience, her memory fades gradually:

I can remember Cordelia throwing my blue knitted hat over the bridge, I remember falling through the ice and then my mother running towards me.... All these things are certain, but in between them there's a hazy space. The dead people and the woman in the cloak are there, but in the same way dreams are. I'm not sure now, that it really was the Virgin Mary. I believe it but I no longer know it (192).

Later Elaine acknowledges:

I've forgotten things, I've forgotten that I've forgotten them. I remember my old school, but only dimly, as if I was last there five years instead of five months. I remember going to Sunday school, but not the details. I know I don't like the thought of Mrs. Smeath, but I've forgotten why. I've forgotten about fainting and about stacks of plates, and about falling into the creek and also about seeing the Virgin Mary. I've forgotten all of the bad things that have happened. Although I see Cordelia and Grace every day, I remember none of those things; only that they used to be my friends, when I was younger, before I had other friends. There's something to do with them, something like a sentence on a tiny dry print on a page, flattened out.... Their names are like the names of a footnote.... There is no emotion attached to these names....

Nobody mentions anything about this missing time, except my mother. Once in a while she says, 'That bad time you had,' and I am puzzled. What is she talking about? I find these references to bad times vaguely threatening, vaguely insulting: I am not the sort of girl who has bad times, I have good times only.... I am happy as a clam: hard-shelled, firmly closed (200-1).

Here Elaine demonstrates that her traumatic memories start to fade as she discovers the need to suppress them. These not only include the bridge episode, but several instances when Elaine was able to cause herself to faint when Cordelia persecuted her, or she needed to escape the continual pressure that the disapproving Mrs Smeath put on her. Even though Elaine's mother acts as witness to the "bad" time in her life, Elaine herself denies ever having had a miserable past, because she regards her present self as somebody incapable of discontent.

The memory of the bridge incident fades even more as the novel progresses. At one stage when Cordelia and Elaine walk past the bridge during their high school years, Elaine recounts: "I have a quick memory of the old bridge, of the creek beneath it: under our feet the dead people must be dissolving, turning to water, cold and clear, flowing downhill. But I forget about this immediately" (231-2). Here Elaine completely disregards the memory of the incident with her friends, and only recalls earlier superstitions about dead people under the bridge. It is only in the final pages of the novel when she returns to the bridge as an adult, that she remembers the event with greater clarity:

That was where I fell into the water, there is the bank where I scrambled up. That's where I stood, with the snow falling on me, unable to summon the will to move. That's where I heard the voice.

There was no voice. No one came walking on air down from the bridge, there was no lady in a dark cloak bending over me.... I know this didn't happen. There was only darkness and silence. Nothing and nothing (418).

Elaine is at this stage able to recollect the experience without the pain that might have accompanied it before she made peace with her nine-year old tormentors. This experience had been suppressed and situated in the area of darkness and silence in her mind, the "nothing and nothing." In the final chapter, entitled "Bridge" (the title of a painting) Elaine comes to terms with her fears and repressions. She is now aware that she has

needed to suppress these painful memories for emotional survival. On page 263, she refers to amnesia directly:

There are several diseases of the memory. Forgetfulness of nouns, for instance, or numbers. Or there are complex amnesias. With one, you can lose your entire past; you start afresh, learning how to tie you shoe-laces, how to eat with a fork, how to read and sing. You are introduced to your relatives, your oldest friends, as if you've never met them before; you get a second chance with them, better than forgiveness because you can begin innocent. With another form, you keep the distant past but you lose the present. When someone you've known all your life goes out of the room and then comes back in, you greet them as if they've been gone twenty years; you weep and weep, with joy and relief, as if at a reunion with the dead.

I sometimes wonder which of these will afflict me, later; because I know one of them will.

For years I wanted to be older, and now I am (263).

Being conscious of the impact that memory loss may have on her life to come, the protagonist takes that which she *does* remember, and allows it to become the subject of her paintings. In this way she shows how elements of the past have played a central role in the formation of her identity. She returns to Toronto for her first Retrospective, in which she exhibits the paintings that she has done about her past, and sold already. *Half a Face*, for example, is a picture of Cordelia, the childhood friend who tormented and victimised Elaine the most. "Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture," she says, "... I am not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I am afraid of being Cordelia" (227). Through her paintings she demonstrates how she has come to understand that Cordelia was a victimiser because she had herself been oppressed by a patronizing father, who altered house rules at will in order to keep his control over her. Victims and victimisers are therefore interchangeable. In the same way *Falling Women* is about women who have fallen in love with, and been deceived by, men in the same way that Elaine herself was scarred emotionally by two of her ex-partners, with whom she has also come to empathise through years of perspective. But the character that features in the majority of the paintings referred to is Mrs Smeath. As Elaine looks at the paintings she had done of Mrs Smeath a few years before, an understanding of her own selfhood emerges. At first she says, "It's still a mystery to me, why I hate her so much" (352). But then she realises that she is more similar to Mrs

Smeath than she had ever imagined, and that this identification must have generated the loathing she felt towards Mrs Smeath:

It's the eyes I look at now. I used to think they were self-righteous eyes, piggy and smug inside their wire frames; and they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty.... Mrs. Smeath was a transplant to the city, from somewhere a lot smaller. A displaced person, as I was.

Now I can see myself, through these painted eyes of Mrs. Smeath: a frazzle-headed ragamuffin from heaven knows where, a gypsy practically, with a heathen father and a feckless mother who traipsed around in slacks and gathered weeds. I was unbaptised, a nest for demons: how could she know what germs of blasphemy and unfaith were breeding in me? And yet she took me in.

Some of this must be true. I have not done it justice, or rather mercy. Instead I went for vengeance.

An eye for an eye leads only to more violence (405).

Through this journey of self-identification, Elaine has become conscious of the fact that all of those who had plagued her in her youth had themselves been tormented. Understandably this makes their blame infallible. In the light of the empathy felt for her female counterparts, the significance of negative aspects of Elaine's amnesia fades. Finally, the reader is aware that both Cat's Eye and Surfacing are novels of fiction and that this justifies the fabrication of memories by Atwood's characters. This is, however, where the main difference between these novels and the semi-fictionalised autobiography of Grace Marks occurs. In Alias Grace, amnesia and selective memory become a contentious issue as Atwood's work entails the life of a real person.

When Alias Grace was published in 1996, Atwood enthusiasts were aware that a different approach was required for its reading. This can be attributed to the fact that unlike Atwood's previous novels, which were purely fictional, Alias Grace is based on historical events. Therefore, where the reader is emotionally drawn into the worldview of the narrator of a work of fiction, s/he registers at the beginning of Alias Grace the unreliability of the speaker because of the complex historical character of the narrative. This novel revolves around the sensational real-life murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery in Toronto in 1843. Grace Marks, the ambiguous female protagonist and a servant in the Kinnear residence at the time, is accused of Nancy's murder and imprisoned for 30 years, a considerable amount of which is spent in an asylum. Yet to the

very end of the novel it is unclear whether Grace is guilty or not. In the “Author’s Afterword”, Atwood states that,

Whether she was indeed the co-murderer of Nancy Montgomery and lover of James McDermott is far from clear; nor whether she was ever genuinely ‘insane’, or only acting that way – as many did – to secure better conditions for herself. The true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma (539).

In Alias Grace the reader is never certain whether to trust Grace and that which she decides to tell us, as we recognise her continually shifting positions. There is constant doubt as to her true identity: is she a liar, or is it due to her traumatic experiences that sections of her mind are blank? Neither are we left with the assurance, as in the case of the fictional novels, that Grace herself is aware of what she has “confabulated”³ in order to make amends for her memory loss. Even though the reader is eager to place confidence in the first-person speaker, complete access to Grace’s truth eludes us throughout the novel. The reader is hereby constantly reminded of the author’s post-modern concerns with truth and historicity. Surfacing and Cat’s Eye remain works of fiction wherein the narrator is permitted to forget and is hence licensed to recreate her own past, whereas we know that we will never have full access to the truth in Alias Grace. Atwood concludes her “Author’s Afterword” with the following words on literary invention:

When in doubt, I have tried the most likely possibility, while accommodating all possibilities wherever feasible. Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent (542).

From beginning to end, Atwood keeps the reader mesmerised by Grace. We continually wonder whether she is speaking the truth about her past, or whether the narrative is simply composed of a number of “confabulations”,³ which are constructed to repair gaps and fissures in her memory. According to Alan Parkin, who discusses the psychological effects of trauma on the memory-retention of the individual, “confabulation” is a medical condition caused by frontal lobe damage. “At a clinical level,” says Parkin,

³ The term “confabulation” comes (Parkin: 1987) is defined and discussed below.

the most commonly reported memory impairment following frontal lobe damage is confabulation. At a basic level, this means simply the production of a false memory; but to be used effectively, it has to be refined somewhat. Most patients with memory disorders will, if pressed hard enough, attempt to answer questions even though they cannot remember.... These momentary confabulations are characterized as responses that could be correct, given the patient's circumstances, but just happen not to be. By contrast with these there are fantastic confabulations, in which the patient's recollections are clearly fictional in the view of everyone but the patient (1987: 114-5).

In Surfacing and Cat's Eye a similar kind of fabrication of memories occurs, yet the reader is aware of the fictional nature of these stories, produced by an author who not only has the full right of invention, but also that of the inclusion and exclusion of personal (and by implication, reality-based) information.

Having sketched Atwood's preoccupation with self-identity, memory and amnesia, let us consider her attitude towards post-modern truth, history and representation. Not only does Atwood raise questions about gender and sexuality, since "attitudes towards Grace reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women" (538), but moreover, she aims to be provocative by exposing the "truth" as told through "facts" by different characters. She also reveals how each speaker, whether a first or a third person speaker, selects and constructs facts relating to the events of the novel and their meanings. As Atwood persistently questions the authority of the speaker, she makes us aware that to whatever degree deconstruction occurs, the text will inevitably become a construction itself. We therefore experience the construction of the author as she stays as close to historical facts as possible while exposing the gaps and inconsistencies in recorded information. And yet, as the creator of Alias Grace, Atwood is authorised to select information and to put different sections together so that we have an opportunity to change our preconceptions about truth and history. The reader, who is unlikely to be familiar with the exact series of events that have taken place in the history of Toronto, will need to follow a story that is logically recreated. The author both orders the novel systematically and introduces into Grace's first-person narrative elements which the reader questions. As a postmodern novel, Alias Grace unsettles the reader and initiates questions into the historical and epistemological issues that are addressed.

Linda Hutcheon outlines the issues of truth, history and representation in terms of postmodernism. She introduces the subject matter by defining postmodernism:

In general terms [postmodernism] takes the form of the self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement.... [Its] distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity (1989:1).

She later adds that

What post-modern theory and practice together suggest is that everything always was 'cultural' in this sense, that is, always mediated by representations.... It is not that representation now dominates or effaces referent, but rather that it... self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation – that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it (1989:34).

Postmodern fiction provides arguably the optimum conditions for understanding our knowledge of the past, and making us aware of representation as it refers to a mixture of the self-referents of fiction and the "factual" nature of history (1989:36). The question of truth is directly related to the events chosen by the author, as

The postmodern situation is that a 'truth is being told, with "facts" to back it up, but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts. In fact, that teller – of story or history – also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole (1989:58).

It is clear then, that the issue of truth is directly related not only to the reconstruction of the text, but also to its representation. A representation is self-consciously a visual, verbal, or aural image, a narrative (a sequence of images and ideas), or a product (and producer) of ideology as it provides several meanings at once (Stimpson quoted in Hutcheon 1989:31). Hutcheon argues that we can never know the "real" except through representations: "Our common-sense presuppositions about the 'real' depend upon how that 'real' is described, how it is put into discourse and interpreted" (1989:33). Becoming aware of the role that representations play in society, we need to pose questions about the past and how we come to know it, whether through secondary sources or the more trusted primary sources. It becomes clear that the information supplied to us about the past, in

whatever form, will inevitably be partial as it is recorded by a subjective individual or group. Furthermore, anybody who makes use of historical documentation will extract from the material that which interests that individual personally, and this inevitably results in bias.

Hutcheon (quoting Doctorow), questions the relationship between the documentary and the formalizing impulses in historiographic representation:

'The source of this problematising in postmodern fiction seems to lie in the textual nature of the archival traces of events which are then made into facts. Because those traces are already textualised, they can be 'buried, exhumed, deposed, contradicted, recanted'.

She goes on to warn us that

... If the archive consists of texts, it is open to all kinds of use and abuse.... Certainly the status of the document has altered: since it is acknowledged that it can offer no direct access to the past, then it must be a representation or a replacement through textual refiguring of the brute event" (1989:80).

The reader of any narrative fiction based on history needs to keep this in mind, as it makes us aware that any fictionalized historical text acts as a representation. Whilst being aware of her own bias, Margaret Atwood addresses the concepts of representation and history throughout Alias Grace. The author goes to great lengths to keep her story as close to the evidence at her disposal as she can, and acknowledges that where there was a lack of information, she filled in the spaces. In her "Author's Afterword" Atwood says

I have of course fictionalized historical events (as did many commentators who claimed to be writing history.) I have not changed any known facts, although the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally 'known' (541).

Yet, notwithstanding the author's improvisation in the form of invention, the absence of important information in a text is necessary to engage the reader's active collaboration. These textual gaps and fissures determine the degree of suspense experienced by the reader, who participates actively in the story and would lose interest if all particulars were revealed. Reading is not a question of knowledge, but a question of interpretation. As a text is being read, it comes to life, challenging the reader's mind in various ways.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has written several influential works on narrative theory, and stresses the importance of the role that the reader has to play in the transmission of information by the author. She argues that hermeneutics or the “information gap” causes the reader to form different hypotheses throughout the reading of the novel and to choose among them which one is more likely to resemble reality. This reaction is only possible if the inevitable gaps in any given text are utilized effectively by the author:

How to make a bagel? First you take a hole.... And how to make a narrative text? In exactly the same way. Holes or gaps are so central in narrative fiction because the materials of the text provides for the reconstruction of a world (or a story) are insufficient for saturation. No matter how detailed the presentation is, further questions can always be asked; gaps always remain open. ‘No tale’, says Iser (quoted by Rimmon-Kenan), ‘can be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in gaps left by the text itself’ (1983:127).

In Alias Grace, as in any work of narrative fiction, it is important that the reader becomes actively involved in the text. Throughout this text – written in both first and third persons and including archival material as well as the narratives of witnesses and historians – the reader is encouraged to question authority and fact, and to select among different interpretations of the story. The reader, just as the author, therefore participates in a continual process of opting for relevant information and arranging it into an individual hierarchy of significance. This means that the act of reading involves an imitation of the author in terms of the reconstruction of the text. But to what extent can the author be trusted to supply us with reconstructed information that comes as close to reality as possible? Rimmon-Kenan says of the response of the reader that where

... the reader reaches a point where (s)he can no longer integrate an element within a constructed category, the implication would seem to be either that the generalization established so far has been mistaken (a mistake which the text may have encouraged), or that the character has changed (1983:39-40).

The reader is thus caught up in a struggle to decide whether certain information provided is mistaken, or whether the author was careless in the provision of data. Rimmon-Kenan comments further on the reliability of the narrator:

A reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth. An unreliable narrator, on the other hand, is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect. There can, of course, be different degrees of unreliability. But how can the reader know whether (s)he is supposed to trust or distrust the narrator's account? What indications does the text give him/her one way or the other? Signs of unreliability are perhaps easier to specify, and reliability can then be negatively defined by their absence.

The main sources of unreliability are the narrator's limited knowledge, his/her personal involvement, and his/her problematic value-scheme (1983:100).

The reader cannot fail to register Margaret Atwood's personal involvement in the creation of Alias Grace. The authorial bias is obvious through the attractive, candid and vivid representations of Grace, suggesting the author's first-person fascination with the character. Atwood has partial knowledge but in the construction of the story gives her own version. She causes Grace to be attractive to the reader although admitting that the issue of guilt remains unresolved at the end. The enigma of the character of Grace Marks and the author's limited knowledge is further complicated by Atwood's diagnosis of a number of mental illnesses, particularly those related to memory loss. The reader is recurrently compelled to ask: who remembers? Who forgets? Why?

It is not only issues about narrative fiction, truth, and representation that are addressed. Atwood explicitly concentrates on the history of mental illness, and particularly that of women sufferers in the nineteenth century, whose predicament has been either overlooked or misinterpreted in the past. In the "Author's Afterword", Atwood states:

The rapid generation of new theories of mental illness was a characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century, as was the creation of clinics and asylums, both public and private. There was intense curiosity and excitement about phenomena such as memory and amnesia, somnambulism, 'hysteria', trace states, 'nervous diseases', and the import of dreams, among scientists and writers alike (541).

The discussion of these phenomena could be further explored in a doctoral thesis. Within the scope of this dissertation, however, the phenomenon of amnesia has been selected for a focus. This phenomenon causes the reader to question that which we know about Atwood's Grace in terms of her medical condition. The fusion of post-modern concerns with texts (the question of literary invention) and the author's careful research into medical history will therefore be discussed with reference to specific instances in the text. As we have seen in Cat's Eye and Surfacing, the concern with memory and amnesia is a recurring motif in Atwood's work, and in this thesis I will be examining memory and amnesia in the partly fictional, partly historical novel Alias Grace.

Although biological evidence for memory loss is of some relevance, our main interest lies in the psychological effects of trauma on the memory-retention of the individual. Alan Parkin, whose definition of confabulation I have already used, employs the ideas of William James (1842-1910). Parkin quotes James with regard to the retrieval of memories, which must be guided in some way, and then adds his own response:

'Suppose I am silent for a moment, and then say ..."Remember!, Recollect!" Does your... memory obey the order, and reproduce any definite image from your past? Certainly not. It stands staring into vacancy, and asking, "What kind of thing do you wish to remember?"'. James' point is that retrieval is a reconstructive process, in which currently available information serves to initiate the direct search for memories in long-term store (1987: 30).

In Alias Grace the reader is faced with many instances when it is uncertain whether Grace remembers an event correctly, or whether she, like the protagonist in Surfacing, remembers only that which she wishes. The reader is aware that Grace has a history of traumatic experiences, and might therefore consider the condition of psychogenic amnesia, or loss of memory, in the absence of any detectable brain pathology as an influencing factor in Grace's life. Psychogenic amnesia, says Parkin, "... almost always follows some unpleasant and emotionally disturbing set of events, and the degree of impairment can be extremely variable" (1987: 163). He goes on to describe this condition in more detail:

Psychogenic amnesias are known to be one sign of a class of mental illnesses known as dissociative orders. These orders all involve some breakdown in

identity, but the extent is variable (note that in some of the older literature these disorders are referred to as hysterias). In dissociative amnesia there is an inability to remember specific sets of events. Dissociative fugue involves loss of personal identity and in some cases the adoption of a new identity. The third form is dissociative identity disorder, which is perhaps better known as multiple personality (1987: 163).

Grace's diagnosis as a patient suffering from double consciousness becomes significant in the neuro-hypnotic episode when Jerome Du Pont hypnotises her. It is no longer Grace who purports to speak, but Mary Whitney, who mocks Doctor Jordan outright, something that the reader would not consider Grace to be capable of doing. Mary Whitney, who has been believed by the reader to be Grace's only and closest real-life friend while she was working as a servant at the Alderman Parkinsons', is revealed to be an alter-ego created by Grace in order to deal with trauma. Grace's multiple personality disorder therefore goes hand in hand with her amnesia. Parkin summarises these disorders, and also notes their relevance to criminal actions and judicial process:

Psychogenic memory disorders are a fascinating but poorly understood set of phenomena. They are instances of a dissociative state in which the individuals become partly or wholly separated from their memories. Dissociative amnesia is the least severe of these disorders, affecting only a part of the individual's life. In fugue the disorder results in a complete loss of personal identity, whereas in multiple personality disorder the number of personalities are set up to handle different aspects of an individual's life. Although theoretical explanations are still vague, it seems clear that psychogenic states serve to protect an individual from harmful memories. Dissociative amnesia is frequently associated with crime; this may be due to attendant problems with alcoholism or schizophrenia, but there is also evidence for dissociative amnesia. Dissociative states are often malingered, and detection of this remains a clinical challenge. Amnesia for crime is no excuse in law except under certain unusual circumstances...Recently there has been a spate of people claiming to have recovered memories of abuse during childhood. It is likely that many of these claims have been manufactured during therapy (1987: 184).

As mentioned earlier, Atwood states that we are never aware whether Grace has invented her past intentionally, or whether it is due to the nature of memory-loss that she has needed to create her own personal history (539). Atwood's interest in problems concerning the legal establishment of guilt is also a major theme in the novel. Through the narration of Grace's experiences in court and in the asylum, as well as a selection of

prescripts such as an extract from the Kingston Penitentiary Punishment Book of 1843, Atwood questions the power of the nineteenth-century authorities to decide whether a person – particularly a female person – is innocent or guilty.

Atwood does not stop here. Her interest in class conflict and feminism is portrayed through the abortions of Nancy and Mary, who had both been servant-girls. Atwood demonstrates the difficulties that women faced at this time, with their limited choices for work and especially their exclusion to available knowledge about medicine. Such knowledge could have saved both Nancy and Mary emotionally and physically. As to the issue of legal rights, women have no recourse to appeal because of the double standard: men are permitted to be sexually deviant while women are expected to be chaste and virtuous. We query the concepts of guilt and blamelessness because we desire to believe in Grace's innocence. And yet the powerful patriarchal social structure of the time is able to determine guilt without needing concrete proof. In a climate where this social set-up had the capability of destroying women, it is a miracle that Grace survives.

The problematics in Grace's story involve the fact that guilt and innocence are not the central issues. As readers, we want Grace to be innocent. This notion is encouraged by the appealing, attractive and plausible way in which Atwood presents her protagonist. The neuro-hypnotic scene, for example, provides an opportunity for the reader to exonerate Grace. This authorial subjectivity, however, reveals a contradiction in Atwood's commitment to the truth. As mentioned earlier, her exact historical references communicate an accurate reflection of the past. Yet as the author she becomes personally involved with Grace as she constructs her unique first-person narrative, giving Grace a hauntingly evocative voice. Both the author and the reader are therefore faced with a conflict between objectivity and sympathy.

Through carefully studying the character of Grace Marks, as well as the way in which Atwood represents her, the reader is led on a quest of reflection on personal memories and how to deal with them. Parkin asserts that when we recall personal experiences, "we do not have external proof that our memories are correct; the manner in which they enter our consciousness seems to assure their authenticity" (1987: 19). The reader is reminded of this reality throughout the reading of Alias Grace, and, as is

Atwood's intention, questions his/her own memories while questioning Grace's. According to Daniel Frank Chamberlain,

[u]nderstanding the past, like understanding another, involves placing oneself in the past's (or the other's) position in order to become aware of its individuality. In this way a new horizon is opened, revealing not only the other's individuality but one's own particularity as well (1990:13).

Let us embark on a close analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Grace Marks*, and investigate how Grace reveals Atwood's fascination not only with issues of truth, history, representation and narrativity, but also with the class and gender concerns in this post-modern novel.

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Post-modernism, Historiography and 'Truth' in Alias Grace

In the first section of the novel, entitled "Jagged Edge," the reader is introduced to Grace Marks, age twenty-four, who has at this stage been imprisoned for eight years. While walking around the yard of the penitentiary, she thinks back to the time when she was employed at the Kinnear residence and describes various fragments of the murder of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear. The reader is confronted with a confusion of memories, and adopts a sceptical outlook on Grace's narrative throughout the novel.

In this, the opening first-person account, we are not only faced with the reality that Grace herself is uncertain as to what she remembers of her past, but moreover that whatever she will say to Doctor Jordan, the psychiatrist who takes her on as his patient, will be modified by her desire to be discharged from the Penitentiary as soon as possible. This is evident in her admission on pages 5-6 where she says, "I am a model prisoner, and give no trouble. That's what the Governor's wife says.... If I am good enough and keep quiet enough, perhaps after all they will let me go; but it's not easy being quiet and good...." At this early stage the reader is already unable to fathom the complexity of who Grace is. Where she claims to be a model prisoner (even with the awareness of possible release from prison), she simultaneously admits that it is not necessarily easy for her to be "quiet and good", and that she has to suppress spontaneous and expressive traits of her personality.

The introduction of Grace's contradictory personality continues as she describes fragments of the murders. What does Grace remember of the murders, and what does she choose to forget? Despite the fact that we want to trust Grace as a first-person speaker, we are unable to do so as the element of selective memory or amnesia comes into play. The reader is left uninformed with regard to particular and often essential details of the narrative. Atwood initiates a feeling of uneasiness about truth, which is to be questioned by the reader throughout the novel.

The initial brief section of Alias Grace therefore prepares the reader to be sceptical of all Grace's personal accounts, as the first-person speaker of this novel is different from any of the fictional protagonists in Atwood's work that the reader has already encountered. From "Jagged Edge" we move onto "Rocky Road", in which a

narrative poem summarises the events that have taken place. Why does Atwood move from the ambiguous first-person account to a third-person account in the second section, which includes a quoted extract from the *Toronto Mirror*? The newspaper extract comments on the kind of women who went to witness McDermott's execution, described by the journalist as "not very delicate or refined" (11) and the poem is written in a theatrical way that causes the reader to be weary of its accuracy. Where the poem (in the genre of a ballad or epic) is juxtaposed with the newspaper account, it is no longer fact but becomes public knowledge. In the same way, the poem immediately fictionalises the quotation from the *Toronto Mirror*, which purports to be an immediate historical account. This section is therefore a combination of two accounts that are both true and yet both subjective, as each gives its own version of the events as they happened. With the mélange of predisposed first- and third-person narratives, the reader is made to realise that the sources of all information included in the novel are questionable. The poem represents one of the many different versions of the events as they occurred. Another such version is presented in the form of an eye-witness account in the third section of the novel.

Susanna Moodie gives a brief physical description of Grace in her book Life in the Clearings (1853), which is both critical and uncomplimentary, contradicting the attractive character that Atwood introduces in "Jagged Edge". Moodie introduces this extremely biased estimation of Grace as she says, "her face would be rather handsome if not for the long curved chin, which gives, as it always does to most persons who have this facial defect, a cunning, cruel expression... [s]he looks like a person rather above her humble station..." (21). We question Susanna Moodie not only because of the bigoted way in which she presents the protagonist, but because of the theatrical mode in which she goes about her description, implying that Grace's physical features are related to her guilt. She depicts Grace in a rich and colourful manner, which points to her literary background. Atwood says about Susanna Moodie in her "Author's Afterword" that she "can't resist the potential for literary melodrama.... The influence of Dickens' *Oliver Twist* – a favourite of Moodie's – is evident in the tale of the bloodshot eyes that were said to be haunting Grace Marks" (538). Atwood demonstrates Moodie's tendency to exaggerate; her accounts were indeed strongly influenced by the books that she had read.

It is therefore clear that the reader needs to be wary of the only eye-witness reports available. With that in mind, we return to Grace, who demonstrates a clear perception of the contrasting opinions about her by listing a number of such opinions not only about her physique, but also about her character. "... I wonder how I can be all these different things at once?" she asks. This is a crucial question because notwithstanding the subjective view of the journalists, medical practitioners and interested parties such as Susanna Moodie, Grace herself cannot vouch for being either a "good girl with a pliable nature" or "cunning and devious" (25). Although the reader might wish to believe Grace, we have no certainty about her present and past identities. If she is suffering from amnesia and multiple personality disorder, we cannot put her in the category of innocence or guilt as mental illness precludes any judgment in these terms.

"Puss in Corner" concentrates on Grace as an inmate of the asylum, and because we see this chiefly through her eyes, we need to carefully explore the characteristics that she states about herself. Her inner thoughts raise questions about her behaviour as a female mental patient. On page 27 she says, "... if I laughed out loud I might not be able to stop; and also it would spoil [the family of the Governor's] romantic notion of me." She is aware of the image created around her person, and strives to keep that image in place through self-discipline and self-containment. In a similar way, she is conscious of the advantages of remorse, even as a facade: "...this is a Penitentiary and you are supposed to repent while in it, and you will do better if you say you have done so, whether you have anything to repent of or not" (29). She therefore believes in keeping up appearances in an environment where this is clearly imperative for survival. We come to the realisation already that Grace not only takes part in a limited variety of memories, but in a selection of behaviours as well. This is confirmed by the importance that she assigns to acting as a repentant prisoner towards the Governor's wife: "...but I've learnt how to keep my face still... and I said I had repented in bitter tears, and was now a changed person, and would she wish me to remove the tea things now..." (29). Grace has undoubtedly spent much time contemplating her past. Even though she may not have reached a conclusion about her culpability, she is willing to admit guilt to the Governor's wife (who has turned her into an object of charity) in order to draw attention away from herself. In a similar way, she directs Simon's attention on to the public's opinion of

herself. On page 30 she tells the reader that certain things said about her were true (such as the fact that she had a good character), while others, such as calling James McDermott her paramour, were falsehoods.

Is Grace herself lying about her memory of involvement with McDermott, or has she simply forgotten the episode? The first instance where Grace loses consciousness and suffers from amnesia occurs in chapter 4. After a doctor arrives at the Governor's residence and attempts to measure Grace's head, she faints. This incident sets in motion many instances where Grace loses consciousness, and because of this even momentary absence of consciousness, her accounts become problematic. The reader cannot help but sympathise with Grace, as it seems that the situation is beyond her control. Yet through Grace's powerful imagination, she is at times able to be drawn back into control. On several occasions Grace relates iniquitous thoughts, which leave the reader uncertain as to whether she is pretending to be the villain that the public has made her out to be, or whether an evil streak in her personality – the one which we have witnessed in Mary – is truly present.

When Doctor Jordan, Grace's self-appointed psychiatrist, arrives at the asylum to question her, we are made to realise Grace's own awareness of control-games. At the same time Grace's fear of being sent back to the asylum needs to be considered as a motive for her careful selection of revelations. When she speaks of the trial of Job in the Bible, she demonstrates both her intelligence and her literary background, yet she denies her own access to knowledge to Simon:

I know it is the book of Job, before Job gets the boils and running sores, and the whirlwinds. It's what Satan says to God....

But I don't say this. I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practised (43).

Grace clearly conceals things from Simon as part of her strategy to resist the power structure of which he forms part. He, however, is completely unaware of this, and continues his session by placing an apple in front of her in order to create an association with the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Grace's thoughts are related to the reader:

The truth is I don't want him watching me while I eat. I don't want him to see my hunger. If you have a need and they find it out, they will use it against you. The best way is to stop from wanting anything (44).

Despite her knowledge of the Bible, Grace does not make the desired connection, and ironically exposes her awareness that knowledge is power. It therefore seems quite natural that she would not disclose any particular information that would cause her to become vulnerable. Doctor Jordan seems unconscious of her need to control access of information, and continues with his enquiry: "You aren't mad, really, are you Grace?" "No sir I am not," she replies (45). She substantiates her answer by stating her fear of returning to the asylum. Naturally the reader is not sure whether the degree of Grace's mental illness has simply been exaggerated by the authoritarian systems at the time, or whether Grace was truly in need of psychiatric assistance. Her denial of madness is directly related to her desire to be set free, and this means that whatever she says that comes across as sincere, may well be part of her strategy to escape the unpleasant conditions in which she finds herself.

While discussing the murders and the trial, Grace says the following to Simon with regard to her innocence, "You should ask the lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know the story better than I do myself. In any case I can't remember, I can remember other things but I have lost that part of my memory entirely" (46). The reader's response is anticipated by Dr Jordan, who speculates about Grace's unreliability when he says: "Perhaps you will tell lies without meaning to, and perhaps you will also tell them deliberately. Perhaps you are a liar." By responding with the words, "There are those who have said I am one [a liar]" (46) she projects the status of her guilt onto the public who has judged her, and she continues to deny consciousness of her state of innocence. Similarly, during the consultation sessions between Doctor Jordan and Grace, her exposure to his romantic intentions causes her to find a strategy to protect her autonomy against him. Her contradictory attitude towards Doctor Jordan clearly influences that which she chooses to reveal about herself at different times and that which she decides to hide from him. This often depends on the amount of trust she places in him. The fourth section of the novel, "Young Man's Fancy", provides the first occasion for us to make a closer acquaintance with Simon Jordan.

As the subject of the third-person narrative, Doctor Jordan is denied the privilege of enunciating his own thoughts throughout the novel. We are hereby alienated from his reality, and even develop a feeling of mistrust, initiated by Grace's awareness of his hidden ambitions: "He's using a kind voice," says Grace on page 46, "kind on the surface but with other desires hidden beneath it." In "Young Man's Fancy" it is revealed that Simon hopes that Grace will provide him with an opportunity to establish his reputation and found a private asylum. But her power over him causes both his failure as a researcher and his ultimate psychic collapse. Compelled by the fear of becoming 'an instant laughing stock' (472) he departs from Toronto after Grace's hypnosis, and as a result of his war-injury, he changes roles with Grace and becomes the amnesiac. Simon is instrumentalised by Atwood in order to allow Grace to take over the narrative as his story peters out at the end of the novel.

In contrast to the disillusionment that the reader experiences concerning Simon, we start to develop a relationship with Grace that involves a certain measure of fondness. A number of first-person accounts commend themselves to the reader due to their candour. These situations (such as those revealing the pleasures of being a servant who moves into her dream-world and imagination) are manipulated by the author so that we become more emotionally involved with Grace. The empathy of the author also leads to the exploration of the feminine aspects of class and gender, which will be expanded on in the second section.

From time to time, however, Grace shocks the reader with her macabre humour, which casts suspicion over her genuineness, and suggests her guilt. "One small knife would never be missed", she says after being relocated to the back kitchen in order to keep her out of danger, "and the best place to hide it would be in my hair, under my cap, well pinned in, as it would be a nasty surprise if it fell out at the wrong time" (75). As with the incident of Grace's thoughts concerning her red hair equating her with a monster, the reader is in doubt as to whether to take this comment as the expected behaviour of a murderess, or as the account of somebody who – being exposed to the taunting wardens and fellow inmates – has herself become strategically devious. With the hypothesis of the double consciousness, we see an uninhibited side of Grace here that we

would normally only associate with Mary, who was never afraid to express her thoughts openly.

Grace, on the other hand, generally feels bewildered about that which she thinks she can expose about her past. This occurs not only during crucial moments of the trial, but also during her conversations with Doctor Jordan, when she says to herself: "He said it wasn't what he wanted me to say, but what I wanted to say myself, that was of interest to him. I said I had no wants of that kind, as it was not my place to want to say anything" (77). Later she claims that she cannot think of anything to say. Grace is evidently confused, and, for the purpose of disclosure, has to select the particular information that will not be damaging to her character. In addition, it is clear that Grace, thus far, has not been able to trust anyone besides Mary Whitney, who, according to Grace, took a keen and genuine interest in her life. Grace's fear of opening up to Doctor Jordan is similar to that which she has experienced in the courtroom, when the journalists twisted her words. She knows that: "[Judged]... [r]ightly or wrongly does not matter.... People want a guilty person. If there has been a crime, they want to know who did it. They don't like not knowing" (104). This observation is correct: The reader is averse to not knowing whether or not her accounts are true. We seek certainty until the last page of the novel. Yet the possibility of reaching this point is obscured by Grace's reluctance to tell Doctor Jordan of her first dream, which has the power to reveal relevant information about who Grace is. She is conscious of the fact that it is the choice of the dreamer to reveal the dream, which is the key to many secrets. To the reader, she describes the dream about the peddler man who had one of her hands, but decides to keep the truth that she had dreamt from Simon:

I say, I can't remember, Sir. I can't remember what I dreamt last night. It was something confusing.... I have little enough of my own, no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of, and I need to keep something for myself; and in any case, what use would he have for my dreams, after all? (116)

Grace therefore omits details either because she feels that Simon is not truly interested, or because she feels threatened by him. Through this censorship of accounts we are made to realise how many different factors influence what Grace actually tells us. Not only does she contradict herself here, first through her denial of memory and then by an admission

of the dream as being confusing, but she also recounts the dream, exactly as it happened, to the reader. In addition, we have access to her motivation for not disclosing information about her dream when she admits her need to keep something for herself. Aside from her personal requirement to keep certain knowledge private, Grace purposely decides to withhold pieces of information at this stage because she does not trust Doctor Jordan. Yet she also admits to having a faulty memory. Like the protagonist of Surfacing, Grace draws an analogy between memories and something concrete when she talks of her own home in Northern Ireland in the section entitled “Broken Dishes”:

I don't recall the place very well, as I was a child when I left it; only in scraps, like a plate that's been broken. There are always some pieces that would seem to belong to another plate altogether; and then there are the empty spaces, where you cannot fit anything in (118-9).

Whereas this sentiment is apparent throughout the novel – where many “empty spaces” account for inconsistencies – Grace astounds the reader with exact details about her journey on the ship to Toronto. Of her first traumatic experience, she displays an excellent memory, during which she witnesses the death of her mother. Why does she lose consciousness only during later distressing situations? This painful encounter did not result in significant memory loss. Grace, having been a child at the time, had not yet developed adult amnesiac patterns at that stage. Later, however, she becomes aware of the need to protect herself against the world, and therefore she requires the formation of various stratagems, paramount amongst which is amnesia, or selective forgetting.

In “Secret Drawer”, the sixth section of the novel, Grace's second loss of consciousness occurs. The events that lead up to it are recounted with a similar attention to detail as that of Grace's childhood. As from Chapter 18, Grace unfolds what she calls, “the happier part of [her] story” (169). Grace's precision in description is questionable, however, because it is unclear whether she chooses to recall good reminiscences, or whether she artlessly forgets negative memories. Does she possess control over her memory or is she powerless in its face? Her good memories are coloured by her affection for – and loss of – Mary Whitney. Mary was her true friend and somebody who Nancy Montgomery can never be. The description of the happy period is made more poignant by

the loss of a confidante. She remembers the process as more painful through the loss of her only true friend.

After Mary's abortion and her subsequent death, the reader is exposed to an anxious and frenetic Grace for a second time. She hears a voice right after Mary's death saying "*Let me in...*" and when Mary gives no sign of having said anything, Grace thinks that she has heard wrong and Mary was saying "*Let me out*" (207). This traumatic experience has clearly made a deep impact on Grace, who, after these hallucinations has an even stranger reaction to Mary's death when she wakes up from her sleep:

They said I lay like that for ten hours, and no one could wake me... and that when I did wake up I did not seem to know where I was, or what had happened; and I kept asking where Grace had gone.... I said that Grace was lost... and I needed to search for her. Then I fell into a deep sleep. When I woke, it was a day later, and I knew again that I was Grace, and that Mary was dead....

But I had no memory of anything I said or did during the time I was awake, between the two long sleeps; and this worried me (208-9).

One may surmise that due to the shock of Mary's death, Grace has suffered not only from amnesia but from an instance of multiple personality disorder as well. At this stage, however, nothing can be validated. With no evidence or witnesses other than Moodie to back her statements, Grace is left unable to defend herself and her actions. How, then, can the reader evaluate Grace's position? Is she the manipulated or is she the manipulator of the narrative? Grace provides some new evidence about McDermott in "*Fox and Geese*", while he causes us to query once again the amount of influence that she is able to exert upon others.

In the prescript of "*Fox and Geese*", we are told by McDermott that Grace "was very jealous of the difference made between her and the housekeeper, whom she hated, and to whom she was often very insolent and saucy...." (273). If McDermott is correct about Grace, we are no longer faced with the inoffensive and innocent person that we have believed Grace to be. And yet Grace had good reason to loathe Nancy, and the reader is drawn into her reactions to Nancy by the account of her closeness to Mary Whitney. Grace's feelings toward Nancy were not purely motivated by malice. She had been extremely hurt by Nancy's recurrent unfriendliness and her unpredictable behavior. But this was made worse by her own realisation that Nancy could not act as a substitute

for Mary, who had been her only true friend. Mary Whitney, although dead, is therefore present in the novel all the time because everything that happens to Grace happens through Mary. Grace, being unfriended at the Kinnear residence, is vulnerable, with no allies to help her. For this reason it is not surprising that she does not overtly oppose the murder plan.

During Grace's first quarrel with Nancy, when the two debate whether or not the story of Susanna is found in the Bible, the ambiguity of the concept of truth is made manifest through the revelation of the existence of the Apocrypha. Grace says,

Then he [Mr. Kinnear] said the Apocrypha was a book where they'd put all the stories from Biblical times that they'd decided should not go into the Bible. I was most astonished to hear this, and I said, Who decided? Because I'd always thought that the Bible was written by God, as it was called the Word of God, and everyone termed it so (259).

Here Atwood, as a post-modern writer, reflects on the reliability of her own writing. By implication, as the author, she is all-powerful and all-knowing in the process of selecting her material. Atwood decides what is included and what is excluded in the novel. Grace chooses to omit certain details from her account with a similar intention, altering the particulars in order to suit her own ends. Author and third-person narrator collude in structuring the narrative.

At the beginning of chapter 27, we are confronted with Grace's ability to modify the truth for her own purposes. In this particular situation she does so to raise her spirits, after awakening in her gloomy cell:

Today when I woke up there was a beautiful pink sunrise, with the mist lying over the fields like a white soft cloud of muslin, and the sun shining through the layers of it all blurred and rosy like a peach gently on fire.

In fact I have no idea of what kind of a sunrise there was... there was a tune going through my head, a little song that Jamie Walsh used to play sometimes upon his flute:

Tom Tom the Piper's son,
Stole a pig and away he run,
And all the tune that he could play
Was over the hills and far away.

I knew I'd remembered it wrong, and the real song said that the pig was eat and Tom was beat... but I didn't see why I shouldn't make it come out in a better way; and as long as I told no one of what was in my mind, there was no one to hold me to account, or correct me, just as there was no one to say that the real sunrise was nothing like the one I'd invented for myself... (275-6).

This piece of information is central to what we know about Grace and the occurrence of literary fabrication in the novel. She begins by admitting that she had an inaccurate recollection of the tune, and then she admits that she did not feel guilty about altering its reality in order to improve her own psychic situation. The reader sympathises with Grace as this common psychological phenomenon employs the means of imagination.

Yet our scepticism is reinforced by Grace's disposition towards bribery, and the extent to which the promise and provision of a reward can influence her version of the events as they occurred. In chapter 28 she says:

Because [Doctor Jordan] was so thoughtful as to bring me this radish, I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him; for I have always believed that one good turn deserves another" (286).

Her eagerness to make her story as interesting as possible confirms the fact that she is consciously able to enhance the genuineness of the story at any stage, and to manipulate her past in order to gain recompense. This is similar to the behaviour of Jeremiah the Peddler, who illustrates Atwood's problematisation of autobiographical truth by appearing at intervals throughout Grace's life under a number of different names. He fascinates the reader, more so than Kinnear and McDermott, who demonstrate no signs of ambiguity other than the nature of each of their relationships with Grace, the only indication being a dream in which somebody starts caressing her (326). Does Grace's dream reflect her hidden sexual confidence, or her fear of intimacy with patronising men? Grace's walking outside in a bout of somnambulism (her feet having marks of earth and grass on them) might well be an indication of the former.

Grace seems powerless in the face of her amnesia, and even more so when she realises that she has a fearless, extrovert and sexually confident alter-ego that has been active while she had been unconscious. When we come to the anticipated murder scene, we know that Grace cannot delay her disclosure of knowledge any more: she has to

inform both the reader and Simon of her experience. Yet in the end we never find out what she knows about the murders, and we are left in the dark as to the amount of play-acting involved in her amnesia. In section nine of the novel, entitled "Hearts and Gizzards", the reader can, however, still relate to the thoughts of Simon as they approach the retracing of the murders. He decides that Grace must know the truth, even if she is unaware of it: "She knows; she knows. She may not know that she knows, but buried deep within her, the knowledge is there" (338).

Like Simon, the reader is aware that the knowledge of the murder must lie within Grace's subconscious, and the more anxious Simon becomes, the more the tension mounts within the reader. We wish the truth about Grace's real identity to be revealed. But our expectations are almost immediately dashed by the reminder that Grace selects the information she discloses, when she says in chapter 33: "What should I tell Dr. Jordan about this day?" (342). The word "should" illustrates that Grace feels a certain obligation to relate particular details to Doctor Jordan, but is in doubt as to which ones to select. The fact that she is unable to recall the event due to her amnesia, complicates the matter even further. She continues,

I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. McKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I did not say even to him; and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well... my true voice could not get out (342).

Atwood here gives Grace the ability to articulate the denial of expression in court, and shows how external factors have influenced the varying accounts. The reader is swayed in Grace's favour as the realisation of how helpless she was in the face of the punitive patriarchal system becomes manifest. We continue to pity her as she goes on a quest of the mind to find out what she remembers, by questioning the difference between dream and reality:

Did he say, I saw you outside... in your nightgown, in the moonlight? Did he say, who were you looking for? Was it a man? Did he say, I pay good wages but I want good service in return? Did he say, do not worry, I will not tell you mistress, it will be our secret?... He might have said that. Or I might have been asleep (343).

Grace's self-interrogation fortifies the presumption that she was the victim of her employer as much as Nancy was. Yet she fails to provide clear evidence about the affair, especially to Doctor Jordan, possibly out of fear of his rejection, or perhaps because her amnesia is real.

At the end of another series of scenes (343-5), during which the reader is not certain whether Grace is experiencing a dream, remembering reality or imagining what happened (the last three sections ending with "I think I sleep"), Grace reveals the possibility of remembering the part that she played in the murder: "On the palm of my hand there's a disaster. I must have been born with it. I carry it with me wherever I go. When he touched me, the bad luck came off on him" (345). The reader wonders whether this is an admission on Grace's part, and whether she means in a figurative sense that "... I have made this bed, and now I am lying in it." It is impossible for the reader to reach any clarity, especially when Grace places herself in a passive, instrumentalised role when she says, "... today I must go on with the story. Or the story must go on with me, carrying me inside it..." (345). Grace desires an objectivity that she can never attain, which is conceivably why Simon does not trust her when he asks Grace about possible harassment on Kinnear's part:

'Had Mr. Kinnear ever made improper advance to you, Grace?'

She looks at him again; this time there's a faint smile.

'I don't know what you mean by improper, Sir. He never used foul language to me.'

'Did he ever touch you? Did he take liberties?'

'... He was a kind enough master... and liberal when he wished to be.' (358).

This far from satisfies Dr. Jordan, and he continues his interrogation by asking her whether Kinnear put his hands inside her clothing and whether she was lying down. Simon breaches the code of professional conduct by encroaching on Grace's privacy and touches on a painful memory that she hasn't worked through at this stage. Although her sharp reaction brings her credibility into question (as she might feel that she needs to hide the truth) it is impossible for her to keep her calm owing to Simon's virtual victimisation. Doctor Jordan's pressing questions, however, reflect those of the reader, whose mind does not cease to question Grace's accounts. He wants

... what she refuses to tell; what she chooses perhaps not even to know. Knowledge of guilt, or else of innocence: either could be concealed... He's got the hook in her mouth, but can he pull her out? Up, out of the abyss, up to the light. Out of the deep blue sea (374).

Will Doctor Jordan be the one to bring the relevant memories out of her subconscious mind into her conscious thoughts? Even though our attitude towards Doctor Jordan has been tinged by his ambition and overt curiosity, we find ourselves asking as he does whether Grace could "be insane, with the astonishingly devious plausibility of the experienced maniac" (375).

In her Confession ("Lady of the Lake", section ten), Grace describes how McDermott plunders his victims for valuables and money. We see a very logical side of Grace when she packs up the deceased Nancy's possessions – one that is completely misinterpreted by the press and by Jamie, who, by implication, accuse her of stealing the box: "I looked into Nancy's box and at her dresses; and I thought, There is no need for them to go to waste, poor Nancy has no further use for them. So I took the box and all in it..." (387). Soon after, in "Falling Timbers", Grace recalls how the press "sneered at me for referring to it [the box] as mine" while the clothes are in Grace's opinion no longer Nancy's because "the dead have no use for such things" (412). The press's interpretation of her intentions introduces the subjectivity with which the self-important journalists operated. Grace tells us that "[t]hey held it against me as well that I was at first calm and in good spirits, with full and clear eyes, which they took for callousness; but if I'd been weeping and crying, they would have said it showed my guilt; for they'd already decided I was guilty..." (412). The truth about the patriarchal community in which Grace, Mary and Nancy found themselves is stark: their position of guilt or innocence is irrelevant in the face of societal condemnation.

We are compelled to query the reliability of first-person accounts when Grace says she was "at a loss" when they started questioning her in court (413). Mackenzie's appointment as her lawyer renders her account even more problematic: he tells her to relate her story in a coherent way, not as Grace truly remembered it, but a plausible story that would "hang together" (415). The intimidation involved in legal procedures for women at the time and the pressure that Mr Mackenzie places upon Grace therefore further influence that which she reveals in court. The question of coherence, which

occupies Atwood as the author of this post-modern work, becomes central. Grace says what she has been instructed to say, which creates great confusion in her mind as she tries to remember the right answers. She has no choice but to tell the story as McKenzie desires it to be told, his ulterior motive being to use her case to set off his own law career. Grace's case establishes McKenzie as a lawyer, in the same way in which it causes Simon's downfall. Grace's revelations about McKenzie's influence demonstrate Atwood's questions about the limitations of consistency as established in court. Is Grace's story to be believed, given the overwhelming amount of patriarchal and judicial influence?

James McDermott is hanged, and even though Grace's life is spared, she is not given freedom because nobody attempts to truly understand her story. Yet, in retrospect, her integrity is called into question after the murders when the two characters arrive at the border between Canada and the USA, and Grace says, "I remembered what Jeremiah told me about borders, and how easy it was to cross them" (397). If borders are regarded as the fine line between truth and untruth, we are never certain when Grace crosses borders in the way Jeremiah does, both physically and metaphorically. And yet her apparent candour with regard to her forgotten past causes the reader to pity her as she says, "It's as if I never existed, because no trace of me remains, I have left no marks.... It is almost the same as being innocent (398). Her innocence is as elusive as that which she has forgotten. We are reminded of the pathos of her forgotten past; Grace is the one who has lost her history.

Doctor Jordan, in the meantime, is adamant to find out the truth about Grace's past and goes in search of Kenneth MacKenzie in Toronto. In "Solomon's Temple" (part twelve) the conversation between these two men - despite their evident bias - brings to light some insightful information about criminal behaviour, which might be relevant to Grace:

My dear man... you'd be amazed how common such lapses of memory are, amongst the criminal element. Very few of them can remember having done anything wrong at all.... Forgetting... is a good deal more convenient than remembering.... Has it occurred to you that she [Grace] may have derived her corroborative details from the same source [newspaper accounts]? Criminals will read about themselves endlessly, if given the chance (433-4).

It is therefore possible that Grace has filled in the gaps of her broken memory with pieces of information from articles about her, and has adopted these ideas as her own. In the "Author's Afterword", Atwood herself foregrounds this ambiguity, and reiterates that matters of reliability and guilt will remain unsolved in Grace's history.

When Grace realises that Doctor Jordan has left for Toronto to find out the truth, however, she makes a striking observation about guilt: "He doesn't understand yet that guilt comes to you not from the things you've done, but from the things that others have done to you" (441). Grace transfers blame onto different individuals who played a part in her imprisonment. This is not a case of paranoia, but is substantiated by the circumstances under which she was sentenced. Atwood emphasises the instrumentalised, agentless role that women of her class, such as Mary, are reduced to in a society where they are disempowered by their gender and their inferior social status.

The presence of Mary Whitney as a living character in Grace's past is not presented ambiguously to the reader, who assumes that if Grace can describe her friend so thoroughly and convincingly, surely her "real" existence is to be trusted. When Doctor Jordan, however, finds the gravestone of Mary Whitney, the reader is alerted for the first time to the possibility that the Mary of Grace's account does not exist as a close friend of hers. The Mary Whitney buried beneath could have been anyone who Grace decided to use in the fabrication of her story. Simon confirms the reader's uncertainty: "Nothing has been proved. But nothing has been disproved, either" (451).

With this doubt in mind, the reader is plunged into the hypnotism scene of "Pandora's Box", wherein we are made certain that our protagonist suffers from a severe case of multi-personality disorder. At the same time, however, Atwood reveals that the truth of Grace's past, or present, is irrelevant in the light of gender and class inequity in a society administrated by men.

Class, Gender and 'Truth' in Alias Grace

This section will explore the way in which the reader is positioned to observe class and gender as impacting on the truth, and illustrate how there can be no final truth for Grace, Mary and Nancy due to the patriarchal nature of the society in which they live. As we have seen in the previous section, the reader's doubts with reference to what Grace says about Mary implicate what Grace reveals about herself. Grace talks about Mary in such detail that we want to believe that she exists, and this is where Mary Whitney's historical character comes into question. Accounts of candour and innocence in the sixth section of the novel, "Secret Drawer", are central to the double-consciousness of Grace/Mary, which is finally established in "Pandora's Box", where the neuro-hypnotic sequence occurs.

Mary takes Grace under her wing from the start of Grace's engagement at the Alderman Parkinsons', and both women are revealed to be sympathetic towards the other. Grace describes the compassion of her "new-made friend" Mary in the following extract:

When I would make a mistake and become anxious about it, Mary would comfort me and say I should not take things so seriously, and if you never made a mistake you would never learn; and when Mrs. Honey spoke sharply to me and I was on the verge of tears, Mary would say I should not mind her, as that was her way, it was because she had swallowed a bottle of vinegar and it came out on her tongue (181-2).

Mary is presented as a dependable friend who guides Grace. She is the type of individual that Grace had never known, and therefore had a strong need to create. Our fondness towards Grace develops as she, and Mary, reveal their rich imaginations, and their appreciation of simple things such as when they are hanging up the washing:

When we had a wash hanging out and the first drops began to fall, we would rush out with the baskets and gather all in as quickly as we could, and then haul it up the stairs and hang it out anew in the drying room.... I did love the smell of a laundry dried outside, it was a good and fresh smell; and the shirts and the nightgowns flapping in the breeze on a sunny day were like large white birds, or angels rejoicing, although without any heads.

But when we hung the same things up inside, in the grey twilight of the drying room, they looked different, like pale ghosts of themselves hovering and shimmering there in the gloom, and the look of them, so silent and bodiless, made

me afraid. And Mary, who was very quick in such matters, soon found this out, and would hide behind the sheets, and press up against them so there was the outline of her face, and give out a moaning sound; or she would get behind the nightshirts and make her arms move. Her object was to frighten me... and I would shriek; and then we would chase up and down between the rows of washing, laughing and screaming, but trying not to laugh and scream too loud, and if I would catch her I would dart in and tickle her, for she was very ticklish; and sometimes we would try on Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's corsets... and walk around with our chests sticking out and looking down our noses; and we would be so overcome that we would fall backwards into the baskets of linens, and lie there gasping like fish until we had recovered our straight faces again (184).

The reader cannot help but take personal pleasure in these accounts, which are described so vividly that the reality of their occurrence seems almost incontrovertible. Yet Mary's personality makes up for the characteristics that Grace lacks: Mary is never afraid to express her opinion or emotions, no matter how contradictory they are. This is clear in her reaction to Grace's father, who Grace herself could never defy:

My father came round at the end of the first month, and wanted all my wages; but I could only give him a quarter, having spent the rest. And then he began to curse and swear, and seized me by the arm; but Mary set the stablehands onto him. And he came back at the end of the second month... and Mary told him he wasn't to come any more. And he called her hard names, and she called him worse, and whistled for the men; and so he was chased off (181).

Mary has a most powerful influence on Grace. She protects her and is her equal; this equality is something that Grace fails to experience again, even when she is married to Jamie at the end of the novel. The intimacy and friendliness between Mary and Grace is illustrated in the example of All Hallows Eve, which at the same time introduces Mary's misfortune:

On the night of October the 31st... Mary came to our room with something hidden in her apron, and she said, Look, I have got us four apples.... Oh, I said, are they for us to eat, and she said We will eat them after, but this is the night when you can find out who you will marry...

Here is the knife and the apple, she said, and you must take the peel off in one long piece; and then without looking behind you, you must throw it over your left shoulder. And it will spell out the initial of the man you will marry, and tonight you will dream about him (191-2).

Even though Grace admits she is too young to think about husbands, Mary here illustrates a nearness to Grace through her genuine camaraderie and concern for Grace's future (however superstitious). This is not repeated by any other character. But at the same time, Mary's story soon goes wrong as on that fateful night when Mary peels her own apple to see who she would marry:

Then it was her turn, and she began to peel. But the peel on the first apple broke, and also on the second; and I gave her my extra one, but she was so nervous that she cut it in two almost as soon as she had begun. And then she laughed, and said it was only a foolish old wives' tale, and she ate the third apple... and we turned to making fun of Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's corsets; but underneath all the funning she was upset (192).

The apple has several symbolic meanings (De Vries 1981. s.v. "apple"), and each of them is relevant in this case. First of all, it alludes to desire, particularly in the sexual sense of the word. Subsequent to All Hallows Eve, Mary commences a sexual relationship with a young man, which marks the end of her intimacy with Grace, as she becomes restless and no longer wants to chatter in the way Grace had become used to. Sexual desire as represented by the apple is also equated with sin, as a temptation of the flesh. Mary's punishment is her pregnancy, indicated by the illness and vomiting. Because of her lack of knowledge about the dangers of an abortion, she dies. Death is conventionally regarded as the ultimate punishment for temptation and sin, as indicated by the fall of Eve in the Garden of Eden. As a result of Mary's gender and class, she herself becomes a fallen woman. She is sexually exploited by her fiancé, who goes back on his promise and provides this almost penniless servant with insufficient money as compensation. For Mary, no physical survival is possible.

At the same time, however, the apple represents immortality, as Eve gave the apple to Adam to make him immortal through Knowledge (De Vries 1981: 17-9). Mary Whitney, who had been Grace's only true friend, is present throughout the novel even through her death, because everything that Grace experiences, happens through Mary. Mary therefore lives on after her death in Grace; she *is* Grace. The relationship between Mary and Grace is central, and the fact that Grace and Mary are doubles of each other is brought to light in "Pandora's Box". This is broadcast to the reader in the neuro-hypnotic episode, when we realise that the two personalities are the same person in body. Here all

assumptions that we might have created around Grace's identity are overturned, because under hypnosis, for the first time Grace's words are marked with astonishing confidence and conviction. This is also where we move from Grace's story to Mary's story.

In the library of Mrs Quennell's house, the guests wait for Grace to enter with Doctor Jerome DuPont, who is to hypnotise her. When Doctor Jordan gets a chance to ask whether Grace had relations with James McDermott, not only the characters but also the reader is shocked, as the person who responds is a different person to the Grace with whom we have thus far been acquainted. The narrator tells us that "... someone laughs; it doesn't sound like Grace." The voice of this character is "... thin, wavering, watery; but fully present, fully alert" (464). Issues that have been contentious since the beginning of the novel are stated with such self-assurance that the reader is left overwhelmed and eager to absorb the unwaveringness that she exudes.

The reader may have been prepared to believe that Grace did not have an affair with either McDermott or Mr Kinnear. Yet during the unravelling of the narrative, Atwood does not once allow us to trust Grace completely, as we are continually made to query her seemingly platonic relations with both of these characters. Her "innocence" is finally attested during her hypnosis, where the degree of her mental illness in the form of multiple personality disorder is also exposed. Here Mary Whitney, now unveiled as Grace's other consciousness, boasts about McDermott:

Yes. I would meet him outside... in my nightdress, in the moonlight. I'd press up against him, I'd let him kiss me... But that was all... I'd let him do. I had him on a string, and Mr. Kinnear as well. I had the two of them dancing to my tune! (465).

What one personality has denied throughout the novel to Doctor Jordan, the other admits outright under hypnosis. As the realisation that Mary *is* Grace sinks in here, the reader is provided with the opportunity to exonerate Grace from being Nancy's murderer because of her state of double consciousness.

While this confession might clarify previous uncertainties about relations between McDermott and Marks, we are still in the dark with regard to Nancy's murder, as our protagonist provides no definite clarification: "She needed... to be put out of her misery... It was my kerchief that strangled her.... The kerchief killed her. Hands held

it... She had to die. The wages of sin is death" (466). While Grace/Mary shifts the blame onto an inanimate object (the kerchief), she expresses her moral concern with Nancy, whose life had to be ended because of her promiscuity. But the reader becomes aware of the irrelevance of the motivation of murder through the demonstration of Grace's multiple personality disorder: "You've deceived yourselves! I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it!" (467) She initiates a guessing game as to who she really is, until Simon deduces at last that she is Mary Whitney (468). Grace therefore not only denies being herself during hypnosis, but she adopts the character of Mary in order to protect her conscious identity as Grace as well. After a sharp mysterious clap she says about the murder,

I told James to do it. I urged him to. I was there all along!....

But Grace doesn't know. She's never known!... They almost hanged her, but that would have been wrong. She knew nothing! (468)

Mary goes on to explain that she borrowed Grace's... "earthly shell [h]er fleshly garment. She forgot to open the window, and so I couldn't get out!" She pleads that nobody tells Grace, in case she gets sent back to the asylum: "I liked it there at first, I could talk out loud there. I could laugh. I could tell what happened. But no one listened to me.... I was not heard" (468). Mary explains here how such simple expressions as talking out loud and laughing can be mistaken for madness and hysteria in the asylum. At the same time we realise that the Mary-personality is the opposite of Grace in that she is confident in her verbal expressions. Furthermore, Mary speaks to Doctor Jordan with sexual flirtatiousness and a salacious tone that distances her character from the mode of Grace's narration, which portrays our protagonist as restrained and morally righteous:

But why? Oh Doctor, you are always asking why. Poking your nose in, and not only your nose. You are such a curious man! Curiosity killed the cat, you know, Doctor. You should watch out for that little mouse beside you; and her little furry mousehole too! (465)

In addition to the contrast between Mary and Grace, Mary proves to be a paradoxical figure on her own. On the one hand, she is the confident, trusted person that has always been willing to listen to Grace. But on the other hand, as seen in the above quotation, she can be cunning and sexually suggestive when she so desires. Being the only trustworthy

figure in Grace's life, she is at the same time the obvious candidate for culpability and therefore the prime suspect in the murder. Atwood, however, suggests that in the socio-economic situation where Mary and Grace are female subordinates, they are at the risk of male domination, and that a double consciousness as a result of this domination is a survival strategy.

"Pandora's Box" places all forgoing information in the novel on a loose footing. It is evident that Grace suffers from multiple personality disorder – the kind of *dédoublement* or *double consciousness* that Simon, Jeremiah and the reverend discuss after the hypnosis, and what we would today commonly refer to as *schizophrenia*. Confronted with a situation in which one personality (Grace) is unaware of the other (Mary), we can only infer that our protagonist has two contrasting personae: one that is fearless and sexually confident, the other who comes across to the reader as modest and decent. We can also make the assumption that Grace has transferred the traumatic events of her own past onto her friend Mary, in order to cope with reality. And yet nothing can be irrefutably proved, because Grace is not conscious during the hypnosis, and is present only in bodily form. In addition the reader has no access to the scene before the hypnosis with Jerome DuPont or to what Grace said that might have influenced her behaviour in the session.

With this ongoing ambiguity about Grace, the reader is urged to concentrate on an understanding of the events and the accounts thereof, rather than to reach a concrete conclusion about Grace's innocence or guilt, which Atwood proves to be unattainable. Atwood's fascination with class and gender playing into the possibility of knowing is illustrated by the distance between the reader who doesn't know the truth and Grace who knows that it is not a question of truth. She is therefore the designer of survival strategies; this has nothing to do with truth. Our interpretation of truth in the narrative is integrally related to class, sexuality and gender roles. If Grace is innocent, she is presumed to be guilty just as Mary was after her death – nobody tries to protect either of them but instead society draws conclusions based on prejudice. The quest for truth is therefore at odds with social realities. This is illustrated, for example, by the fact that Mary Whitney would have had the knowledge and the power to say no to the abortion that eventually caused her death, had she been a member of a different class. Nancy was fortunate enough to

on her finger, and rich into the bargain. It would not be right at all. Mary Whitney had done the same as her, and had gone to her death. Why should the one be rewarded and the other punished, for the same sin? (321)

Grace reveals the social injustice with regard to the prospects of unmarried pregnant women in her society, and illustrates this injustice further through Kinnear's unawareness. Grace remarks, "I could hear the sound of Nancy's voice from the parlour, and I knew she must be reading out loud. She liked to do it, as she thought it was genteel; but she always pretended that Mr Kinnear required it of her" (322). This endeavour to gratify Kinnear is completely dependent on his will. This is evident as Grace remarks, when she overhears Nancy expressing her concern to Kinnear about the servants:

Which of the servants, Mr. Kinnear wanted to know; and Nancy said both of them, and Mr. Kinnear laughed and said of course there were three servants in the house, not two, as she was a servant herself; and Nancy said it was kind of him to remind her of that; and she must now leave him, as she had her duties in the kitchen to attend to, and there was another sound of rustling, and of struggling too, as if she was trying to get up. Mr. Kinnear laughed some more and said she should stay where she was, it was her master's command, and Nancy said bitterly that she supposed that was what she was paid for; and then he soothed her, and asked her what was worrying her about the servants. Was the work getting done, was the main thing, he said, and he did not much care who cleaned his boots as long as they were clean, as he paid good wages and expected to get value for his money (323-4).

We see juxtaposed here the utter helplessness that Nancy experiences with the complete authority that Kinnear has over her. His social standing provides him with the power to determine his wants. It is for this reason that he is able to exploit Nancy sexually, and give her the temporary satisfaction of being "needed". "But I did listen afterwards," remarks Grace,

[o]nce they'd gone up; and I heard Mr. Kinnear saying, I know you're hiding, come out right now, you dirty girl, do as I say, or I will have to catch you, and when I do...

And then a laugh from Nancy, and then a little scream (324-5).

Through an understanding of Nancy's position in a vicious circle of victimization, Grace is able to forgive Nancy at the close of the novel. In addition to Mary, these two women are central characters in the novel, and as servants, act as representations of gender and

class discrimination. But it was not only servant women who were oppressed in patriarchal culture. Rachel Humphrey, Doctor Jordan's landlady who is of a superior social status, also suffers at the hands of a societal structure ruled by men. Her husband, Major C.D. Humphrey, is an ex-military man as well as a dipsomaniac, who not only undermines his wife's value, but neglects her in search of other sexual adventures. When Simon arrives on the scene, he becomes her new focus: she hungers for attention and begs it from the reluctant doctor. We realise from the start that Rachel is denied a separate voice: her story is told by the third-person narrator through Simon's consciousness. Whatever she feels and thinks is therefore only seen through Simon's eyes:

He [Simon] makes his way stealthily down the front stairs, but not stealthily enough: his landlady has taken to waylaying him on some trivial matter or other, and she glides out from the parlour now, in her faded black silk and lace collar, clutching her customary handkerchief in one thin hand, as if tears are never far off.... Today she wears her habitual expression of strained anxiety... she is doubtless prone to headaches – and of something else he can't quite place....

As a rule, Simon avoids her type of attenuated and quietly distraught female, although doctors attract such women like magnets (84).

Rachel illustrates not only the need of women for affection, but also the craving of knowledge about their own bodies to which only doctors at this time had access. "She's lonely," observes Simon, "as well she might be, married to a sodden and straying Major – and loneliness in a woman is like hunger in a dog. He has no wish to be the recipient of dolorous afternoon confidences, behind drawn curtains, in the parlour" (85). Despite Simon's dislike of Mrs Humphrey, he comes to realise his attraction to her after she faints and eventually she becomes the prey of his sexual desires just as Nancy does to Kinnear's.

Having a mistress – for that's what she's become, he [Simon] supposes, and it hasn't taken long! – is worse than having a wife. The responsibilities involved are weightier, and more muddled.

The first time was an accident: he was ambushed in his sleep. Nature took advantage of him, creeping up on him as he lay entranced, without his daytime armour; his own dreams turned against him. This is the very thing Rachel claims of herself: she was sleepwalking, she says... she was lost. *Lost* is a word she uses a lot. She has always been of a sensitive nature, she's told him, and subject to

Quilts therefore not only reveal the need for creativity in women, but the difficulty of those in a lower social class to have such creative access. Grace goes on to talk about quilts as flags, which signifies the need for women to express themselves boldly in an innovative manner when they are unable to do so verbally in society. Finally, she reveals some of the secrets of quilts as bed-covers when she speaks of the symbolism of a bed:

The winter quilts were of deeper colours than the summer ones, with reds and oranges and blues and purples; and some of them had silks and velvets and brocade pieces in them. Over the years in prison, when I have been by myself, as I am a good deal of the time, I have closed my eyes and turned my head towards the sun, and I have seen a red and an orange that were like the brightness of those quilts; and when we'd hung a half-dozen of them up on the line, all in a row, I thought that they looked like flags, hung out by an army as it goes to war.

And since that time I have thought, why is it that women have chosen to sew such flags, and then to lay them on the tops of beds? For they make the bed the most noticeable thing in the room. And then I have thought, it's for a warning. Because you may think a bed is a peaceful thing, Sir, and to you it may mean rest and comfort and a good night's sleep. But it isn't so for everyone; and there are many dangerous things that may take place in a bed. It is where we are born, and that is our first peril in life; and it is where the women give birth, which is often their last. And it is where the act takes place between men and women... and some call it love, and others despair, or else merely an indignity which they must suffer through. And finally beds are what we sleep in, and where we dream, and often where we die (185-6).

Quilts therefore act as symbols for the undisclosed secrets of women: their sufferings as well as the pleasures that could not find expression in any other way. With this thought in mind, we come to the last part of the novel, "Tree of Paradise", in which Grace discusses the quilt that she would like to make about her life, and expresses her solidarity with Nancy and Mary as the sufferers of patriarchal injustice.

Conclusion: The Tree of Paradise

I started with Surfacing and Cat's Eye because these are earlier Atwood novels that turn on her creation of fictional autobiography and the use of a first-person narrator. Episodes of selective amnesia characterise the protagonists' journeys towards selfhood. Although the forgotten events are not narrated, their psychic significance is central and must be addressed, for instance through Elaine Risley's art.

I then moved to Alias Grace, claiming that its status is different from fictional autobiography since the main protagonist is a historical character. Grace's story is narrated in the first person, though many other types of narration are used. In his essay 'Truth, Memory and Narrative,' André Brink introduces Alias Grace (a historiographical fiction novel) into a discussion about the question of truth in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-Apartheid South Africa. He reinforces what we have witnessed in the reading of the Atwood novel about narrative structure:

As her point of departure Atwood takes the three different versions of the murder Grace Marks herself offered at the time, and the two of her accomplice: these multiple locations of memory within individuals converge to constitute public memory. And this is amplified and further complicated by incorporating into the text various other contemporary accounts, testimonies and commentaries – even a poem that circulated at the time, and drawings of the accused in court. All of these, representing various degrees of fictification, constitute, and constantly modify, shift, or even remake, the public memory (to which Alias Grace itself makes yet another contribution). All these components are packaged, as a frame for the narrative, with epigraphs taken from sources as far apart as Basho and Longfellow, Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allen Poe and others. The thing the reader is hyperconscious of at the moment of entry into the novel is that s/he is entering a textualised and storified world. Within this world, the processes of its constitution are constantly foregrounded by the manner in which Grace explicitly manipulates her narrative to suit the requirements of her interlocutors (1998: 34).

The combination of Grace's ambiguous first-person narrative, archival material and poems or parts thereof are employed by Atwood to illustrate the interrelation between fiction and non-fiction. But where do we situate the connection made between 'truth' and 'facts,' with the phenomenon of fiction? Brink reminds us that the enterprise of fiction:

The novel does not end in any form of closure⁴ in terms of a conclusion about Grace's guilt, and yet, in the concluding chapter, Atwood reveals the way in which Grace Marks can author her own story in the creation of a transgressive re-telling of her history. As story-teller and tapestry artist in 'The Tree of Paradise,' Grace is able to bring together her story with Mary's and Nancy's and at the same time establish an autonomous identity – she is no longer enslaved by her past.

In "The Tree of Paradise," Grace addresses Simon and tells him how she has received pardon, and is to be released from the penitentiary. The reader, who is aware that Grace's actual past can never be known, is made to realise that what Atwood's novel celebrates is the survival of women like Grace in a patriarchal society. This is achieved through the making of a new story – one of sharing and friendship – out of the sordid stories of Mary and Nancy. Atwood achieves this new story through two projects: by means of the original design of a quilt called "Tree of Paradise," and through a new rendition on the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden:

The way I understand things, the Bible may have been thought out by God, but it was written down by men. And like everything men write down, such as the newspapers, they got the main story right but some of the details wrong.

The pattern of this quilt is called Tree of Paradise, and whoever named that pattern said better than she knew, as the Bible does not say Trees. It says there were two different trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge; but I believe there was only the one, and that the Fruit of Life and the Fruit of Good and Evil were the same. And if you ate of it you would die, but if you didn't eat of it you would die also; although if you did eat of it, you would be less bone-ignorant by the time you got around to your death.

Such an arrangement would appear to be more the way life is" (533-4).

⁴ Jeremy Hawthorn notes in his *Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* that although all literary works come to a close or conclusion, the same sense of satisfaction is not inevitable. He creates a link between the lack of closure and modernism, which is relevant to Atwood's post-modern stance concerning closure. Hawthorn says: "A lack of closure is frequently associated with modernist or experimental art, including literature. Modernist writing often seems to challenge those literary conventions that arouse certain expectations in the reader regarding what is acceptable as an ending for a literary work. Such works are described as *open-ended* or lacking in closure. This can refer not just to matters of story or plot, but also to aesthetic and ideological issues" (1994: 22). André Brink confirms Atwood's place here: "Her novelistic aim is not solving a mystery but demonstrating how historical mysteries are constructed in the first place" (1998:33).

Grace creates a new story, at the same time exposing its hopelessly patriarchal nature. By showing that the myth of the Garden of Eden was recorded and perpetuated by men, she redresses patriarchal constructions and provides new possibilities for a fruitful life by re-ordering the concepts of good and evil. Atwood investigates the justification of Eve's suffering for her sin forever after, and ironises Adam's blamelessness through Grace's exploration of the meaning of the Tree of Paradise. According to the myth, woman has given up her need to understand or analyse, as she enacts passion, while man enacts reason. The woman is depicted as a loser, and suffers uncontested defeat. Grace expresses her rejection of this biased version, not only through her words, but also by way of her deeds. Through her creation of the quilt, she fabricates a story by a woman about women. An entirely new account is therefore constructed through Mary's and Nancy's experiences. Three interlinked female lives are embroidered in the tapestry. Owing to the creation of the tapestry Grace achieves a form of transgressive agency.

As discussed earlier, quilts are an art form speaking of silent desires, embedded in secret codes. Here Atwood exposes not only the representation of female transgression in *The Tree of Paradise*, but also solidarity and support in the form of the three triangles which will be distinct from the others: one made from Mary's petticoat, one from Nancy's dress and the last from Grace's own prison nightdress. The novel is therefore a story of the three women and the truth about their experiences of exploitation and instrumentalisation. Each of them is victimised by patriarchy; each suffers under this unsympathetic system, and this is what brings the three of them together. Mary has an affair with her mistress' son, who breaks his promise of marriage to her. Because of her ignorance about the danger of abortion, and the doctor's greed, Mary dies. Nancy is exploited by her master, Mr Kinnear, for sexual favours. He is able to exercise his influence over her all the time, while remaining confident that as a fallen woman she is unlikely to leave him. And finally, Grace, our enigmatic protagonist, is a victim of the sexual attentions of Kinnear and McDermott, as well as those of Doctor Jordan, although no proof exists of his sexual involvement with her. Atwood does, however, imply in her "Author's Afterword" that some sort of sexual exploitation must have been performed by one of the doctors attending Grace:

... Grace was considered sane enough to be returned to the penitentiary; where, records show, she was suspected of having become pregnant during her absence. This was a false alarm, but who at the asylum could have been the supposed perpetrator? The wards of the asylum were segregated; the men with the easiest access to the female patients were the doctors (539).

Grace is powerless in the face of the patriarchal penal system, which inflicts a severe penalty on her for a crime that she has never been proved to have committed. And yet, largely thanks to the positive reports of the present warden, she is released from the penitentiary after forty-five years. After her pardon, Grace speaks of the oneness she feels with Nancy and Mary when she opens her restored box that had been closed for 29 years:

The emotions I experienced were strong and painful. The room seemed to darken and I could almost see Nancy and Mary beginning to take shape again inside their clothes, only it was not a pleasant notion, as by now they themselves would be in much the same dilapidated state (516).

She says about Mary: "I think of Mary Whitney frequently these days, and of the time we threw the apple peelings over our shoulders; and it has all come true after a fashion" (532). Before the neuro-hypnotic scene, the reader simply believed that Mary was an actual friend of Grace's. After the hypnosis, we are made aware of Grace's double consciousness, and her need to have created an alter-ego. Similarly the protagonist comes to forgive Nancy, who had not befriended her, and finds compassion for her. She relates on page 531-2:

I had a rage in my heart for many years, against Mary Whitney, and especially against Nancy Montgomery... for letting themselves be done to death in the way that they did, and for leaving me behind with the full weight of it. For a long time I could not find it in me to pardon them.

All ill feelings towards Mary and Nancy are forgotten because through the creative agency of tapestry, Grace can relate to their dilemmas and therefore have compassion for them. Whatever has happened in their history, what they have given Grace is for the present, and she is able to make a new story through the tapestry. This relates to Atwood's own fiction-making process where she, as the author, chooses elements from history and creates a new reality. She demonstrates this through Grace, who, at the end of the novel, has a new life and a new story, made possible through the acknowledgment of

Nancy and Mary's stories as her own. She illustrates this in the final sentence of the novel in a description of the triangles in the quilt:

I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern.

And so we will all be together (534).

Through this female camaraderie, Grace is able to achieve peace of mind. Just as the triangles in the quilt are interrelated, Grace's identity, while still a mystery, cannot be separated from the identities of Mary and Nancy. The reader is left assured that it is not simply the question of truth that drives the novel, but the question of understanding. What is the meaning of truth if one doesn't have a voice of one's own, if one is instrumentalised in the same way that Nancy, Mary and Grace are instrumentalised? In a society where female concerns are not dealt with fairly, the truth of Grace's story cannot merely be a judicial truth. The novel suggests multiple transgressive truths in the collaboration and continuity of the three female protagonists.

Atwood asks us to confront the question of women who can retell their history, to reflect new stories by women who can recreate their past in order to establish a future. The truth of Grace's story is the truth of a woman relating her new reality when she challenges patriarchy through her retelling of the Bible account, and through her expression of female solidarity in the transgression of her art.

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